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# HOLY WATER

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**B**READ and water are the essential diet of man. So much so that when man, for punishment, is deprived of all other food, he is reduced to bread and water. Yet God uses bread and water to bring man the greatest of blessings in the chiefest sacraments.

Water with its power to cleanse in washing ; to irrigate in rain and river ; to destroy in sea and storm, has from earliest times been held in deepest reverence by man. And nowhere more than in the hot countries of the east, homes of early civilization, Mesopotamia and Egypt, where water turns torrid desert into green pastures.

Water was used for purification in primitive religions. The Jews used running water as a cure for disease (thus Naaman the leper) ; and ritual washing had an important part in their Law.



After the Babylonian captivity the Jews not only circumcised, but also baptized their proselytes in a manner similar to St. John the Baptist.

The Son of Man came not to destroy but to fulfil, and he made washing with water a necessary gate into the ark of salvation, the Catholic Church,—"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (Mt. xxviii. 19.)

Though the water used for Baptism need not be blessed, it became the practice to do so, and the solemn blessing of the water of the font on Holy Saturday and on the Vigil of Pentecost has very early origins.

On these two days, after the singing of the Prophecies, a procession is formed and goes to the font singing the forty-second psalm, "As the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God." A prayer is said at the entrance to the Baptistry, and the procession then enters it, and the long blessing is performed in ancient and beautiful form: "Wherefore I bless thee, O creature of water, by the living God, by the true God, by the holy God: by God who in the beginning through his word divided thee from the dry

land: whose Spirit moved upon thee." After breathing thrice on the water, the celebrant lowers the Paschal Candle three times into the water, as three times he says, "May the power of the Holy Ghost descend upon the fulness of this font." Water is then taken out of the font to sprinkle those assisting, and for the stoups and for blessing houses; and finally the oils of Baptism and Chrism, consecrated on Maundy Thursday, are mixed in the water. It is interesting to note that in the fourth century in the East the water from the Epiphany Baptisms was kept for a year in the belief that water drawn on the day of Christ's Baptism would remain uncorrupt.

Baptism is the only sacrament which may be performed in case of urgency by a layman, so it is important that all should know exactly how to perform it. All that is required is that water (not necessarily blessed) should be *poured* (not sprinkled) over the head *while saying* the words "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Such a Baptism should be reported to the parish priest as soon as possible.

Apart from the solemn blessing of the Baptismal waters at Easter and Pentecost, water is blessed in the sacristy before Mass on Sundays. The rite



consists of the exorcism and blessing of salt followed by the exorcism and blessing of water. The salt is mingled with the water ; and a final collect is said. The Church's faith in the power of Holy Water over the forces of evil is well illustrated from this quotation from the blessing of the water :

Pour the power of thy benediction upon this element, made ready by divers cleansings, that this thy creature, in the service of thy mysteries, may effectually receive thy divine grace for the casting forth of devils, and the healing of diseases: that whatsoever in the dwellings or abodes of thy faithful people shall be sprinkled with this water may be free from all uncleanness, and delivered from all evil : let not the spirit of pestilence abide therein, nor the breath of corruption : let all the snares of the unseen enemy depart from thence : and let all such things as are contrary to the health and peace of them that dwell therein be put to flight by the sprinkling of this water ; that as through the invocation of thy holy Name we entreat for them thy saving health, so they may be defended against all assaults.

This water is used for the Asperges (described below) and is placed in the Holy Water stoups at the entrance of the church ; and may be taken

home by the faithful. Only on Easter Day and Whit Sunday is the water not blessed before Mass, the water withdrawn from the font before the admixture of the holy oils on the previous days being used instead.

The Asperges ceremony—so called from the opening words in Latin *asperges* (thou shalt purge)—takes place before the principal Mass on Sunday. The altar, the sacred ministers, clergy, servers and faithful are sprinkled while the celebrant says the antiphon "Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop and I shall be clean : thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow " ; the fifty-first psalm ; and a collect. In Eastertide is said the antiphon, " I beheld water issuing from the right side of the temple, alleluia ; and all to whom that water came were saved and they shall say alleluia, alleluia ", and psalm 118. The Asperges ceremony, in use in the Church at least since the ninth century, is an appropriate reminder that we must approach God in penitence ; and that it is through the waters of Baptism that we are made members of Christ and able to benefit by the fruits of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Water is used several times at Mass. The celebrant washes his hands in the sacristy before Mass while saying " Give grace, O Lord, unto my hands



and cleanse them from every stain that I may serve thee with a clean mind and body." It is probable that in the pre-Reformation Sarum use the prayer which accompanied this washing was "Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known . . ." Water is blessed at the Offertory and mixed in the chalice with the wine, in imitation of the Passover custom, and therefore of our Lord at the Last Supper. The beautiful prayer which accompanies this act has been adapted from an ancient Christmas collect :

O God, who didst wonderfully create, and yet more wonderfully renew the dignity of man's nature : grant that by the mystery of this water and wine we may be made partakers of his divinity, who vouchsafed to share our humanity, Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord.

At the Offertory the celebrant washes his hands while reciting Psalm 26. "I will wash my hands in innocency, O Lord, and so will I go to thine altar." (In the Eastern Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom hot water is mixed into the chalice after the consecration, typifying, perhaps, the Holy Spirit communicating himself to the faithful in Holy Communion.) After the Communion the celebrant drinks the ablutions, the wine and water used to cleanse the chalice.

Holy Water is used for sprinkling the sick and always when administering Holy Communion to them. The coffin is sprinkled solemnly at Absolutions of the Dead, and Holy Water is used frequently in the Office for the Departed. Bells are washed with Holy Water before being annointed with oil at their blessing, so that at their sound demons may be put to flight. Houses are sprinkled on Holy Saturday with the water blessed that morning. And Holy Water is used at blessings of all kinds.

Finally we may consider the most common use of Holy Water : in the stoups at entrances to churches into which it is customary to dip the finger and cross oneself on entering and leaving the church. In the early Church fountains or basins were to be found at the entrances to churches to enable those who entered to pray to cleanse themselves. This was particularly desirable at the time when it was the custom to receive the Blessed Sacrament into the right hand, but since the sixth century, when it became the custom in the West to receive into the mouth, these ablutions were less necessary and the receptacles became smaller. The Holy Water stoups are emptied on Maundy Thursday, only a small quantity being kept for the blessing of the new fire on Holy Saturday.

In taking Holy Water, on entering and leaving a church, one may thankfully remind oneself of the blessings received at Baptism ; or make an act of contrition for forgiveness of one's sins. But Holy Water is something much more than a " reminder " : it is a sacramental, a means whereby God wills to give grace to the faithful user. We might with great spiritual profit copy our Saxon forefathers who in the seventh century were enjoined by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury to " sprinkle their houses with hallowed water as often as they wish," for it is a powerful aid against temptation and the wiles of the devil. That very practical saint, St. Teresa of Avila, knew well from personal experience the power of Holy Water. " I know by frequent experience " she writes in her Autobiography " that there is nothing that puts the devil to flight like Holy Water. They run away before the sign of the cross also, but they return immediately. Great then must be the power of Holy Water."

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